

# Creating Folklore in the 21st Century: Oral Histories and the Kutztown Folk Festival

Jennifer Schlegel

DOI: 10.21104/CL.2024.4.04

## Abstract

This study examines how Pennsylvania Dutch people maintain their heritage and express their identity through oral histories at the Kutztown Folk Festival, an annual celebration of the traditions and contemporary practices of the Pennsylvania Dutch. This folklife festival is the oldest continuously held festival of its kind in the United States. It emphasizes current cultural practices while honoring its cultural heritage through entertainment and education. Many of the educational events occur at the Seminar Stage, the site for the collection of oral histories of “Growing Up Dutch”. Festival participants provide remembrances of the early years of the festival and their Pennsylvania Dutch childhoods. These individual remembrances become meta-folklore and contribute to a community resource for understanding Pennsylvania Dutch identity and belonging in the 21st century, more than three hundred years after the origin of this distinct American ethnic group.

## Key words

Pennsylvania Dutch, reminiscences, folk festival, meta-folklore, folklife, enactments

## Acknowledgment

Collegiality is underrated in academia yet it provides stimulus for the development of ideas and scholarly connections. The SIEF 2023 16th Congress provided the opportunity to develop ideas in a supportive environment and I acknowledge the role of Daniela Stavělová and Rebeka Kunej for organizing and facilitating the panel in which I shared my developing ideas. I am deeply indebted to William Donner who contributed to the data collection for this paper and continues to champion my scholarly growth with his mentoring. The final version of this paper benefited greatly from the suggestions provided by the anonymous reviewers. I am grateful for the many individuals who have generously shared what it was like to grow up Pennsylvania Dutch, including my father, my favorite storyteller. While many voices infuse this work, any errors are mine alone.

## Contact

Jennifer Schlegel, PhD., Kutztown University, 15200 Kutztown Road, Kutztown, PA 19530, USA; e-mail: jschlege@kutztown.edu  
ORCID iD 0000-0002-6796-3595

## Jak citovat / How to cite

Schlegel, Jennifer. 2024. Creating Folklore in the 21st Century: Oral Histories and the Kutztown Folk Festival. *Český lid* 111: 465–482. <https://doi.org/10.21104/CL.2024.4.04>

This study examines how Pennsylvania Dutch people maintain their heritage and express their identity through meta-folkloric practices at the Kutztown Folk Festival, an annual celebration of the traditions and contemporary practices of the Pennsylvania Dutch. The festival is the oldest continuously held folklife festival in the United States and was established in 1950 as the Pennsylvania Dutch Folk Festival by the preeminent American folklife and folklore scholars, Alfred Shoemaker, J. William Frey, and Don Yoder. The purpose of the festival was to present the folk culture of the Pennsylvania Dutch through enactments (not re-enactments) of their practices, as the participants were considered the “bearers of the culture” (Donmoyer 2019). The festival has undergone numerous iterations under different festival directors, which has included increasing commercialism to appeal to the tourist market. Regardless of common critiques of festivalization (Richards 2007), the festival remains a yearly touchstone for local families as participants, volunteers, and attendees, with the annual return to the festival serving as an ethnic ritual (Donner 2017). One response to critiques of the festival becoming too tourist driven is to provide more opportunities to build local community identities. Oral histories provide such an opportunity. Since 2015, the Seminar Stage, an original feature of the festival, is the location where people offer oral histories about growing up Pennsylvania Dutch, including remembrances of the festival. Through these oral histories, festival participants and visitors alike not only represent their culture at the festival, they contribute to producing the meaning of the culture and the festival. In this regard, the Kutztown Folk Festival is now generating its own meta-folklore, adding to the body of lore for this distinct American ethnic group, which dates to the beginning of the 18th century. This article introduces the role of these oral histories in generating a new subject of focus for the examination of Pennsylvania Dutch belonging and identity in the 21st century.

### Who are the Pennsylvania Dutch?

The terms Pennsylvania Dutch and Pennsylvania German, which are used interchangeably, have complex meanings and are often misunderstood. Both names refer to the people, culture, and language of descendants of immigrants to the United States from the greater Palatinate region of Germany during the period from 1683 to approximately 1800. The Pennsylvania Dutch are divided into two groups. The Anabaptists, or plain people, refer to the present-day Old Order Amish and Old Order Mennonites, liberal Mennonites, and Brethren. The second group, the church Pennsylvania Dutch (“church Dutch”), refers to those who are descended from Lutheran

and German Reformed Protestant immigrants. There are smaller numbers of Pennsylvania Dutch from other faith backgrounds, including Catholic, Jewish, and Moravian traditions.

The Pennsylvania Dutch were suspect immigrants in colonial America, with their loyalty to the crown, and later the nation state, called into question (Yoder 1980: 109). Over time, the Anabaptists fenced themselves in (Kraybill – Bowman 2001), separating from other colonial communities and maintaining that separation through their religious principles. The church Dutch did not erect such fences. The church Dutch shared a language, Deitsch, with the Old Order Amish and Mennonites but diverged from their cultural cousins by integrating into the American colonial setting beginning in the 18th century (Fogleman 1996). They maintained majority status in small population centers in Pennsylvania and existed within the broader colonial milieu, while continuing to interact with their Old Order neighbors (Louden 2016: 67). Their ethnicization was an ongoing process during the early Republic, and they “pioneered the process of ethnicization-as-Americanization” (Nolt 2002: 5). They identified as American, taking part in the fighting during the American Revolution, and participating in the first true test of America’s viability, the American Civil War (Valuska – Keller 2004). The church Dutch are also distinct from later German speaking immigrants. By 1830 the church Dutch had begun referring to immigrants from Germany as *Deitschlenner*, or “German people” (Louden 2016: 3).

Cultural and linguistic practices distinguish the Old Orders and the church Dutch from each other and from the *Deitschlenner*. The Old Orders can be considered multiple ethnoreligious populations and the church Dutch can be considered an ethnolinguistic group. Many Old Orders speak Deitsch but do not refer to themselves as Pennsylvania Dutch, although outsiders have applied this ethnonym to the Old Orders. The conflation of Pennsylvania Dutch with the Old Order Amish resulted in a national branding of the Amish as *the* Pennsylvania Dutch (Harasta 2014). This branding contributes to Amish economic prosperity through tourism and entrepreneurialism without the mass spectacles prohibited by their religious beliefs. As an ethnoreligious group, their maintenance of Deitsch is part of their religious conservatism and separation from the outside “English” world. Most Old Order children learn Deitsch in the home as a first language and acquire English in one-room parochial schools (Kraybill – Bowman 2001). The Old Orders use English with tourists and outsiders. With their distinctive dress, use of Deitsch, and selective use of contemporary technology, the Old Orders are easily distinguishable from the “English.”

The church Dutch can be considered an ethnolinguistic group, originally distinguishable by their cultural practices and their language. Whereas the

Old Orders' sense of community is guided by shared religious beliefs, many church Dutch stress the significance of Deitsch as a community marker of identity. Yet there are no shared prescriptions for language use to claim community membership, reflecting the perspective that "ethnolinguistic identity is not a mechanical institutional fact; it is a fact of a psychosocial sort that has emerged where people ascribe a certain primordiality to language and a certain consequentiality to language difference" (Silverstein 2003: 532). As fewer native speakers of Deitsch remain, the church Dutch are becoming less distinguishable from members of the dominant white culture around them. The "linguistic" element of the ethnolinguistic label is diminishing. The extent to which the term "community" holds for this ethnolinguistic group is problematized by the dwindling number of speakers. Yet Pennsylvania Dutch events abound. In the church Dutch areas, economic opportunities based on Pennsylvania Dutch tourism include festivals such as the nine-day Kutztown Folk Festival and the nearby two-day Goschenhoppen Festival. There are additional day-long events and multiple museums and historical societies that feature Pennsylvania Dutch content. The festivalization of Pennsylvania Dutch culture and heritage represents the twin interests of fostering *communitas* and socioeconomic benefits for the region (Duffy – Mair 2018).

Many small towns in Pennsylvania Dutch Country are less ethnically homogenous than they used to be. Such demographic shifts can result in an increase in meta-folk productions and reliance upon them for exposure, consumption and maintenance of community identity; this, in turn, can contribute to ethnic disengagement at the individual level and the slow unraveling of tightly-knit communities (Bauman 2001: 11). Responsibility for cultural continuity may shift to meta-folk productions as community members depend on them to do the work of cultural maintenance. In this model, the Kutztown Folk Festival as a meta-folklore production would be a contributing factor to the weakening of Pennsylvania Dutch community ties should community members rely upon it to "do culture" for them. This model contrasts with the festivalization perspective that suggests that, in addition to increased tourism, annual festivals can actually strengthen "community ties and a sense of local identity" and become "a significant aspect of the socio-economic and cultural landscape of contemporary everyday life" (Bennett – Taylor – Woodward 2014: 1). Tourists and local visitors to the Kutztown Folk Festival encounter heritage and tradition as it is currently lived and practiced. Since its inception the Kutztown Folk Festival founders and subsequent directors have focused on celebrating the folklife and folkways of the church Dutch through the enactment of *current* cultural practices. In an era in which the future of the language and the ethnically

distinguishable practices of the church Dutch is uncertain, the festival itself has become its own community tradition, an ethnic ritual informing what it means to be Pennsylvania Dutch in the 21st century (Donner 2003; 2017).

### The Kutztown Folk Festival

In 2025, the Kutztown Folk Festival will celebrate its 75th year in operation. The festival's development is connected to the folklore and folk festival movements in America and Europe. The folk festival movement in the United States took off in the 1930s, and while it stalled during the war years, it picked up again in the late 1940s (Donner 2016: 121). Alfred Shoemaker, the founder of the the first academic department of American folklore at Franklin and Marshall College in Pennsylvania and co-founder of the original Kutztown Folk Festival, was heavily influenced by his experiences in Europe as an academic and as an American serviceman in the Second World War (Bronner 1998: 266–312). Shoemaker studied folklore in Germany, Sweden, Ireland, and Switzerland prior to the war and as a prisoner of war had many discussions about German folklore with a German ethnologist turned military commander (Ibid.: 288). While the political and social contexts for the development of the folklore movement in Central Europe and the folklife movement in the United States differed, the focus on festivals featuring enactors, or bearers of culture (Pavlicová 2018; Bronner 2017) was comparable. The developing Pennsylvania Dutch and Central European Moravian folk life festival landscapes were similar in that “the maintenance of the traditional lifestyle and traditional manifestations of rural culture were closely connected to the farming population” (Pavlicová 2018: 49).

Celebrations of Pennsylvania Dutch language and culture took root in Pennsylvania during the 1930s, partly as a response to bias against German languages and their speakers in America. Though the Pennsylvania Dutch or Germans saw themselves as distinct from German Americans, they were not immune from anti-German bias (Donner 2016: 106). With the development of the Pennsylvania German Folklore Society in 1933, the founding of the Pennsylvania German *Grundsau* (Groundhog) Lodges in 1934, and the first Pennsylvania Folk Festival in 1935, the decade of the 1930s, while economically challenging, was “nonetheless good times for the arts, for folklore, and for the re-discovery of American traditions” (Gillespie 1976: 11). The original Pennsylvania Folk Festival featured indigenous, Black, and various European-American folk communities, including the Pennsylvania Dutch (Ibid.: 6). Though this original Pennsylvania Folk Festival featuring a diverse array of populations did not last past the 1930s, the desire to draw

academic and popular attention specifically to the Pennsylvania Dutch did. William Troxell, an active promoter of Pennsylvania Dutch folklife, organized the Pennsylvania German Folk Festival in Allentown in 1936, and brought components of that festival to the 1940 New York World's Fair. The desire to draw academic attention to Pennsylvania Dutch folklife was made manifest with the establishment of the Pennsylvania Dutch Folklore Center at Franklin and Marshall College in 1949 (Donner 2016: 109–112).

The high modernity of mid-20th-century America marked a critical moment for shifts in Pennsylvania Dutch culture and language. Agricultural work was moving from reliance on animal to mechanical energy, impacting the social networks of Deutsch speakers oriented around field labor. An increasing number of people became employed outside the farm and in local manufacturing. Children born in church Dutch communities in 1950 were less likely to learn the dialect than children born just ten years earlier. The shift from stable bilingualism to English monolingualism was well on its way due to internal and external social and political pressures (Schlegel 2004). The untethering of the linguistic Deutsch from the “ethnolinguistic” identity of the community was underway even as attention to the culture grew.

The purpose of the original Kutztown Folk Festival was to present the folk culture of the Pennsylvania Dutch through enactments of their present-day practices (Donmoyer 2019). The organizers of the first festival were acutely aware of mid-century criticisms of American folklorists' approach that emphasized folklore research divorced from the very “folks” who produced it (Bronner 1998; Donmoyer 2019). They intentionally addressed this critique by developing a festival that provided an opportunity for attendees to experience “learning by doing.” In the early years, the organizers offered a series of folk culture. The first seminars were multi-day affairs and required additional attendance fees. Each day covered specific elements of Pennsylvania Dutch folklife, including lectures and bus tours. In 1952, for example, there were five days of seminars on topics covering folktales, folk medicine, folksongs, and folk-beliefs; three of the days included bus tours of the surrounding region for passengers to observe the folk culture in action. A 1953 festival brochure stated:

*“Here, then, for the first time in the history of folk-culture studies in America is the opportunity to take advantage of the researches [sic] and contributions of the scholars and experts whilst at the same time becoming acquainted first-hand with the Pennsylvania Dutch folk in a concentrated but unexpurgated form.”* (Pennsylvania German Cultural Heritage Center)

The founders intentionally united scholars and everyday enactors of culture with the local and regional communities in one folklife festival. As the pressures of modernity and post-modernity continue to impact the language and cultural practices of the Pennsylvania Dutch, public heritage events like the festival may become more central in creating unity at the local and regional level. It remains to be seen whether the festival will continue to be a touchstone for Pennsylvania Dutch cultural identity, the high ground in the porousness of “liquid” modernity that elevates individual identity over community (Bauman 2001: 74). The recent public oral history project provides an opportunity for individual cultural actors to produce collective community meaning at the festival.

Despite changes in directors and directions, the festival remains a keenly anticipated event for many families in the area as participants, volunteers, and attendees. For some core participants who organize and execute the festival, the annual return is experienced much like a homecoming, or a festival family reunion. Some of these individuals have been sharing their accounts and memories of the festival through oral histories recounted at the festival (see below). In essence, they are producing a meta-folklore of the festival. For the larger community of festival visitors and participants, the annual return to the festival serves as an ethnic ritual, part of a Pennsylvania Dutch ethnocultural calendar that includes New Year’s Day, Groundhog Day, Fasnacht Day, Easter Day, Thanksgiving, and Christmas. The now nine-day festival always includes the fourth of July, with a special parade to mark the American holiday. This is not by accident; at the time of the founding of the festival, it was a local custom for manufacturers to provide a week of vacation around the fourth of July (Donmoyer 2019). By scheduling the festival at that time, the founders increased the number of people who were able to participate and attend the festival, although the timing made it difficult for area farmers to participate as they were in the midst of summer harvesting. There is a second unintentional benefit of the festival calendar. By celebrating Independence Day, the founders provided an alternative to the narrative that Deitsch language speakers were suspect. The church Dutch actively participated in the armed forces during war and peace time. While their Deitsch-speaking Anabaptist cultural cousins were exempt from service due to their pacifist beliefs, the church Dutch enlisted and were drafted. Given their earlier status as a suspect population, celebrating Independence Day at the Kutztown Folk Festival provides an opportunity for the Pennsylvania Dutch to assert their ethnic identity while demonstrating their American patriotism.

The festival continues to evolve because it represents present-day Pennsylvania Dutch practices; there is continuity in that it maintains the mission

of celebrating and sharing Pennsylvania Dutch folklife through the arts, entertainment, and education. While visitors to the festival can learn from artisans throughout the fairgrounds, the Seminar Stage hosts explicitly educational programming. On this stage, Pennsylvania Dutch scholars and scholars of Pennsylvania Dutch offer lectures on the people and culture. Festival artisans offer presentations on the history, meaning, and practice of their crafts. More recent additions to the festival include the Liars' Contest, a take on the distinctly American "tall tale" genre (Donner 2016: 109), and a *Schreiwër Fescht* (dialect writing contest) influenced by European writing contests in nonstandard languages. The festival today is "building upon the cultural memory of generations of local families who have preserved their heritage in folklife, food, and entertainment" (Donmoyer 2019). Indeed, William Donner, the current director of the Seminar Stage, argues that the festival itself "is now a part of Pennsylvania German history and culture" (Donner 2003: 43). It has become part of the life cycle of the community, generating new traditions for people in the area to experience and engage. The "Growing Up Dutch" public oral history project is a new tradition adding to the history of the Pennsylvania Dutch being "unusual in the degree to which members of the culture itself, both with and without formal academic training, were involved in the description, presentation, and interpretation of their culture and heritage to both academic and public audiences" (Donner 2017: 412). Participants in this project engage in meta-folklore production: their stories about growing up Dutch become part of the participatory folklore generated at the festival. Their offerings are commentaries of and on Pennsylvania Dutch lifeways, including the festival.

### Oral histories at the folk festival

Since 2015<sup>1</sup>, William Donner and I have been interviewing Pennsylvania Dutch people for our project "Growing Up Dutch." The purpose of our study is to examine how Pennsylvania Dutch heritage and identity is maintained and expressed. We have collected more than fifty oral histories. The participants have ranged in age at the time of interview from 19 to 94. Most of the oral histories are recorded at the Seminar Stage on the main thoroughfare of the Kutztown Folk Festival in front of festival audiences ranging in size from two to more than 20 people. Some of the interviewees are festival regulars as entertainers, crafters, speakers, ven-

---

1 Oral histories were not collected in 2020 due to COVID-19 pandemic restrictions.



dors, and volunteers. A few have been attending the festival since childhood, including some who attended the first festival in 1950. Others are festival visitors. While visitors engaging as exhibitors can be considered participating in “one’s own tourism of oneself,” (Addo 2009: 228), allowing cultural members to represent themselves and their life histories in their own words is an anthropological endeavor. The audience-as-actor model has meta-implications. The oral history participant is presented in the role as an expert on Pennsylvania Dutch identity and contributes not just to the festival representation of cultural identity, but to the very production of that cultural identity (Frost 2015).

As an interview location, the Kutztown Folk Festival is beneficial for prompting recollections for the project. The festival provides an arena for Pennsylvania Dutch and others to congregate in a context where Pennsylvania Dutch culture and language is foregrounded. This is helpful for remembering, as participants are in a sensory-rich environment with smells, sounds, and sights that may evoke reminiscences. The opportunity to be heard by an audience of cultural familiars may provide an impetus for their participation. From these interviews, we can talk about the festival as folklife – the living traditions of the festival through participation, observation, and mentoring. The developing origin story of the festival is becoming part of the festival folklore. While the origin and founding of the festival is well-documented, through their oral histories, long-time festival participants contribute experiential, qualitative memories about the people and activities, and the sights and sounds of the early years of the festival.

The truth-value of any oral history is always in question. During these predominantly open-ended interviews, we ask participants what it was like to grow up Dutch. Topics and themes revealed from the generalized remembrances and individual-specific stories add dimension to the collective heritage and community identity that emerges. Remembering itself is an authenticating act, and “rememberers publicly claim to have brought to conscious awareness a state, event, or condition that is real in their eyes; they believe it to be true” (Ochs – Capps 2001: 284). Our older participants address the topic of the folk festival, including specific reminiscences of the festival’s early years. They recall lived practices from their youth that were part of the early festivals. Not all participants are older adults. Two of our younger participants discuss the role of the festival for community building. All participants are valued as sharing authentic remembrances. To a degree, the participants’ remembering of the festival can be authenticated by the festival record to determine their accuracy. The participants’ narrative truths are also authentic. In their comparison of historical truth and narrative truth, Ochs and Capps explain:

*“those narrating past life experiences differ from historians in their sense of authenticity. While narrators are concerned with external validation, their sense of authenticity is primarily internal. Narrators strive to build not just any coherent storyline but one that resonates with their sense of who they are in the world.”* (Ochs – Capps 2001: 285–286)

Our participants’ public rememberings are expressions of how they see themselves as Pennsylvania Dutch in the world. Their tellings inform communal narratives that exemplify “the power of narrative to generate a sense of common identity” (Hinchman – Hinchman 2001: xxiii). As narratives are collected person by person, we find how “the story of one’s individual life depends on the larger stories of the community to which it belongs. That community, in turn, crystallizes around a stock of common memories revived in stories.” (Ibid: xxiii-xxiv) “Growing Up Dutch” stories told at the folk festival contribute to a community master narrative; a community reminiscence.

### Remembrances of the folk festival

Many things have changed at the festival since 1950. Much of the food and some food vendors, including church groups, have remained the same. Farm animals are no longer butchered on site, nor do people make and sample apple cider. Social media concerns have led to the cessation of the thrice daily re-enactment of the public “hanging” of Susanna Cox, a young woman found guilty of murdering her “illegitimate” newborn in 1809. Cox was an uneducated Pennsylvania Dutch housemaid and dialect speaker. She was the last woman to be publicly executed in Pennsylvania, with a reported crowd of 20,000 people witnessing her demise (Richards 2014). Although this event took place more than two hundred years ago, it provides fodder for the discussion of stigmas related to gender, law, and the language that is presented for contemporary debate on the Seminar Stage.

The Seminar Stage is the site for presentations by local scholars and craftspeople, those who research and those who practice the culture – and sometimes both. In addition to these presentations the stage is the location for dialect events including the *Schreier Fescht* writing contest and the Liar’s Contest. “Growing Up Dutch” is advertised as an opportunity to hear what it was like to come of age in Pennsylvania Dutch Country. These volunteer storytellers provide their personal reminiscences and the community context for life as a Pennsylvania Dutch person. Each personal history is distinct, but similar topics and experiences arise. They may recol-

lect changes in farming practices, butchering, daily chores, family life, food, education, or language use. They talk about hard work and working hard. They talk about thriftiness and bountiful food. The participants invoke a collective identity of people who labored daily and spoke the language in rural communities in which children were still educated in one-room schoolhouses during their primary school years. A strong sense of cultural community emerges from these public interviews as the audience members identify with the stories of people who are personal strangers yet cultural familiars. This article is the initial presentation of our oral history data, with further analyses in preparation.

### **Remembrances of the folk festival in the mid-20th century**

At the time of his interview in 2015, Lester was 80 years old. A native speaker of Deitsch, he has been attending the annual festival since the inaugural event. As he remembers details of the early festivals, he reflects repeatedly on how much fun it was and is to be a part of the festival. He recalls Shoemaker recruiting his mother in 1949 to provide a distinctive Pennsylvania Dutch treat. According to Lester, she prepared *Drechter Kuche* for Shoemaker, who immediately knew that he wanted this dish to feature in the festival. Now known as funnel cake, this treat remains a huge hit. Lester and his brothers have played multiple roles at the festival over the decades, and recall features that have come and gone, including roof thatching, Conestoga wagon rides, the butchering of steer and chickens, and apple cider pressing. At the time of his interview, Lester and his four daughters, fifteen grandchildren, and twenty-four great grandchildren were all featured on the Hoedown Stage, giving three performances of family square-dancing each day. As a younger man, Lester and his family members were frequent winners of the eagerly anticipated hoedown challenge. Hoedowns were social events featuring fiddling and folk dancing, with a hoedown caller announcing the dances and steps. Don Yoder (1950) investigated the origins of Pennsylvania Dutch hoedowns, for which there are accounts dating to the mid-19th century. Hoedowns were part of community and family celebrations throughout the year, especially following the fall harvest. In the past Deitsch was the language used by Pennsylvania Dutch hoedown callers, and there are those who still use it. Hoedowning remains a feature of the festival, although it is no longer a participatory event but a performance. Interest in the folk music and folk dancing continues. A recent compilation of Pennsylvania Dutch hoedown music, "Pennsylvania Dutch Treats," includes new recordings of old standards and more recently composed offerings, and, among others, features Lester Miller.

Ruth, who has narrated the hanging of Susanna Cox into her 90s, has attended nearly all of the festivals. She knew Shoemaker and Yoder in the early years. She remembers the huge crowds at that time, laughing as she recalls it being quicker for her to run home to use the bathroom than to stand in line at the festival. Despite the large piles of trash from the unexpectedly high turnout and the muddy thoroughfares after intense rain, Ruth looks back on the early years and remarks on how “great” a time it was. Ruth, too, has had multiple roles at the festival. In addition to her role as a narrator, she has distributed programs and acted in pageants.

Elaine, a 76 year-old block print maker and a *binsagraas* egg artisan, has been exhibiting at the festival since the early 1950s. A retired teacher, she has a second career as a folk artist and is a member of the local guild. Elaine reminisces about many artisans, including a basketmaker, a glassblower (“*her cheeks were all puffed out and she’d get red in the face as she blew her glass*”), a ceramicist, a paper cutter, a toleware painter, a tatter, a coppersmith, a weaver, and a bonnet maker. She knew many people who exhibited at the festival, some of whom were friends, and whose children became friends with hers. In her remembrances she recalls how much fun it was to attend the Friday night dancing. Since the death of her husband, Elaine’s son has taken a role in the family craft business. At least three generations of her family have exhibited at the festival. She first started attending the festival with her father’s cousin and family. They were print block craftspeople, carving the blocks and designs and printing. In those early years, the craftspeople were exhibitors and not vendors. One of the changes Elaine notes is the movement toward vending over exhibiting. The commercialization of the festival remains a contested topic (cf., Boyer 2002; Fooks 2002; Donner 2003), even though craftspeople need to sell and visitors want to purchase.

Our youngest interviewees also discuss festival traditions and changes. Matt, 29, has been helping at the festival since the age of 15. He displays and vends apple and other fruit butters, and sauerkraut. He began this activity after noticing the tradition of sauerkraut and apple vendors had lapsed. Pressing cider was an original festival enactment, remembered by another interviewee. This recycling and renewing of past practices is part of the new iteration of the festival. Matt does not speak the dialect, although he grew up hearing his grandparents and others speak it. Sarah, 19, has been coming to the festival since her mother was pregnant with her. Sarah has held multiple roles, working at a food stand and more recently demonstrating barn star painting, scaling a ladder and painting in public. Sarah is actively learning the dialect and aims to speak it well. Matt and Sarah enjoy the sociality of the festival and participate in enactments that were part of the earliest festivals, decades before they were born. Barn star painting, apple pressing and

sauerkraut fermenting are still practiced in the wider community. The festival has become a tradition for a new generation of exhibitors.

Seven decades separate the youngest and oldest interviewees; they all recount their fondness for the sociality of the festival. They associate the festival with generations of family members. They look forward to seeing demonstrators and participants year after year, like a cultural family reunion. They comment on festival changes resulting in more craftspeople and exhibits that are not Pennsylvania Dutch in origin. They feel it is important to maintain and preserve the language and reflect current community practices, just as the present-day organizers do. Recent changes include the addition of the on-site demonstration of barn star painting that Sarah does. Barn stars have been exhibited at the festival since the earliest days. Visitors can watch Sarah and other barn star artists paint on a makeshift outbuilding much as they would on a local barn. And while the Hoedown Stage has been a popular offering since the festival beginnings, it has changed from a nightly competition to a family demonstration. More recently the organizers have sought to honor the original intent of the festival founders for learning by doing, in allowing participants to join in with the fun by introducing country line dancing to the festival.

### **Remembrances of life in the mid-20th century**

In addition to memories of festival life, participants in the “Growing Up Dutch” project recall activities that are no longer commonly practiced in the community or enacted at the festival. They recall changes in language use and farming practices in mid-20th-century agricultural communities. Predominantly agriculturalists, the Pennsylvania Dutch had large families, which were helpful for providing the labor necessary to successfully operate family farms, including tending to livestock, growing food for the household and the livestock, and providing for the domestic and agricultural upkeep of the farmstead. Some recall the transition from plowing with animals to the less dangerous and faster mechanized plowing. Opportunities for collective work changed with the new technology, although neighbors still relied on neighbors to lease the latest machinery. Many men highlighted the significance of the introduction of the combine and its replacement of manual threshing. In recalling manual threshing, men remember being boys contributing to this difficult labor in searing heat and tell stories about sharing a cool drink on a warm summer’s day with family and the neighbors they worked with.

Interviewees remembered the manual threshing and the home butchering that were common in the community and enacted at the festival. While

the enactments may have disappeared, what the remembrances offer is a description of the embodied behavior. Interviewees describe how it felt to be barefoot in the fields and barns; they describe the intense dust kicked up by threshing and how it impacted their vision and breath; they describe just how hot it would get and remember the way a homemade birch beer soda, stored in a cold cellar, would quench their thirst, or how the end of a hot day harvesting in the fields led to the rite of passage of a young boy drinking his first beer with the other men. These nostalgic sensory memories provide a dimension that is lacking in an observation of an enactment. The subjective experience of heat and refreshment connected to these daily practices provides a phenomenological entranceway to additional memories. The recollections humanize the storyteller not just in terms of their physical experiences, but through expressed sentiment for the way things were. The provision of a homemade refreshment, be it soda or lemonade, invokes a form of daily caregiving. The participation in the ritual of drinking beer with the men invokes a relatable rite of passage from boyhood to manhood. At times speakers use vocal and bodily gestures to emphasize the satisfaction of the moment, as an embodied recollection.

Small-scale farm life in rural areas remained labor intensive for the Pennsylvania Dutch. Many participants talked about growing up on a family farm and gardening. One woman recalls her mother as a prolific seamstress who created children's clothes from feedbags. They wore their feedbag clothing to church and school. Another interviewee, who grew up on a five-and-a-half-acre plot of "wilderness," talks about having a horse named Harry yoked to a homemade two-wheel cart to create arable land in the rockiest of environs, or, as he says, "*probably the worst soil on the planet of the Earth*". He discusses how neighbor helped neighbor, and they "*didn't use money*". People did favors for each other and young people did not expect to be paid, although they might receive gifts of food and drink, or the right to access land to hunt or trap.

Some of our interviewees were native speakers of Deitsch. They detail how they no longer use the language. Stories of entering one-room schoolhouses knowing only Deitsch or being bilingual are not unusual. The time between the 1930s through the 1950s was pivotal for the language shift and is invoked in the oral histories. Some are experientially close to the shift and went through it. Many parents of this generation made the decision to stop using Deitsch based on a moral ideology of what was best for their children in that changing environment (Schlegel 2012: 179–180). It is as though that generation of Deitsch speakers, the ones who shifted to English with their children, anticipated the waning return on investment offered by speaking Deitsch in the larger community.

Joyce, born in 1944, choked back sobs as she recounted her experience of switching to English. When she was in third grade in a one-room schoolhouse, her teacher told the class they could no longer speak Pennsylvania Dutch. When she told her father, he got angry. That night he announced, “*Well, from now on, I’ll talk Dutch to you. But you can talk English back to me.*” Several of the respondents who attended rural one room schoolhouses were ridiculed when they went to the high school in town for the way they spoke English. The theme of being linguistic outsiders – even in a heavily ethnic Pennsylvania Dutch area – was repeated. Two of the participants mentioned being teased in college for having a strong Deitsch accent, with fellow students and professors noting it. One English professor told a student that he “*wrote with a Pennsylvania Dutch accent*”.

The festival is an opportunity for artisans and educators to perform and display Pennsylvania Dutch identity. “Growing Up Dutch” allows visitors to engage in participatory exhibitions. Oral history participants are encouraged to display their authenticity through the narratives they share. This harkens to the original intent of the first festival, which took place at a time when the effects of modernization were impacting the community. Mid-20th-century modernization impacted language choices and how people came to understand those choices through the weight of a linear narrative of progress that produces a “profound temporal bifurcation between the past and the present, often understood as a contrast between tradition and modernity” (Inoue 2004: 3). The past is when the language was spoken, and the present is a moment of language in decline. While modernization and a movement away from an agrarian economy has contributed to the shift away from Deitsch language use, the annual celebration of the folklife of the Pennsylvania Dutch provides a yearly disruption to this narrative and reminds the community of the ways that contemporary Pennsylvania Dutch practices endure in the community.

## Conclusion

The Kutztown Folk Festival, as a measure of cultural vibrancy, indicates both stressors and resiliency. The most recent iteration of the festival revives the focus on cultural enactments, including on-site demonstrations of barn star painting, cooking, and the Liars’ Contest, and refocuses an emphasis on scholarship, featuring presentations by scholars and artisans. The Seminar Stage is a site for the production and consumption of individual and community narratives. These narratives have the potential to provide a structural buttress to community identity, for it is in storytelling that individuals are fulfilling a “duty to compose individually what society

can no longer assure or even promise” (Bauman 2001: 24). And while the festival may be “an experience of, rather than the thing itself” (Ibid.: 26), the storytelling is the thing itself. The remembrances are a sense-making project at the individual and community level. The inclusion of individual reminiscences is evidence of the weaving of the festival into Pennsylvania Dutch community tradition. The public collection of oral histories is a way of capturing the individual in the community. It honors the original intent of the festival by providing an opportunity for locals and visitors alike to participate in the telling of community stories. These oral histories answer Stavělová’s call for “anthropological research that explores the folklore movement as a social and cultural phenomenon from the perspective of the individual and his or her lived experience” (2018: 124). In this way, the Kutztown Folk Festival is generating its own folklore, adding to the body of lore for this distinct American ethnic group. The festival’s resiliency is connected to its commitment to its folklife mission, to not just look to the past but to generate and celebrate new traditions (Donmoyer 2019). While pressures to satiate tourist desires impact the commercial component of the festival enterprise, festival organizers provide opportunities for participatory storytelling that aid in the public socialization of cultural identity and maintenance. Folklore emerges from the narratives as part of the ritual of the festival. Those who return year after year are engaged in the communal work of presenting – and creating – Pennsylvania Dutch folk life and folk culture for nine days every summer.

April 2024

## References

- Addo, Ping-Ann. 2009. Anthropology, Festival, and Spectacle. *Reviews in Anthropology* 38, 3: 217–236. <http://doi.org/10.1080/00938150903110625>
- Bauman, Zygmunt. 2001. *Community. Seeking Safety in an Insecure World*. Malden, MA: Polity Press.
- Bennett, Andy – Taylor, Jodie – Woodward, Ian. 2014. Introduction. In: Bennett, Andy – Taylor, Jodie – Woodward, Ian (eds.): *The Festivalization of Culture*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company.
- Boyer, R. Troy. 2002. The Beautiful Truth, or Our Folk Culture on Parade. *The Pennsylvania German Review* Fall: 33–42.
- Bronner, Simon J. 1998. *Following Tradition. Folklore in the Discourse of American Culture*. Logan, UT: Utah State University Press.



- Bronner, Simon J. 2017. Folklore and Folklife. In: Bronner, Simon J. – Brown, Joshua R. (eds.): *Pennsylvania Germans: An Interpretive Encyclopedia*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press: 361–389.
- Donmoyer, Patrick. 2019. Kutztown Folk Festival. America's Oldest Folklife Celebration. *Pennsylvania Heritage* Summer. [2023-11-23]. Available at: <http://paheritage.wpengine.com/article/kutztown-folk-festival-america-oldest-folklife-celebration-2/>
- Donner, William W. 2003. Reply to Boyer. "The Beautiful Truth" – Beauty is in the Eye of the Beholder. *The Pennsylvania German Review* Spring: 41–44.
- Donner, William W. 2016. *Serious Nonsense. Groundhog Lodges, Versammlinge, and Pennsylvania German Heritage*. University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Donner, William W. 2017. Heritage and Tourism. In: Bronner, Simon J. – Brown, Joshua R. (eds.): *Pennsylvania Germans: An Interpretive Encyclopedia*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press: 411–440.
- Duffy, Michelle – Mair, Judith. 2018. *Festival Encounters. Theoretical Perspectives on Festival Events*. New York: Routledge.
- Fogleman, Aaron Spencer. 1996. *Hopeful Journeys. German Immigration, Settlement, and Political Culture*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Fooks, David. 2002. Reply to Boyer. The Beautiful Truth, or Our Folk Culture on Parade. Another Perspective. *The Pennsylvania German Review* Fall: 43–45.
- Frost, Nicola. 2015. Anthropology and Festivals. *Festival Ecologies. Ethnos* 81, 4: 569–583. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00141844.2014.989875>
- Gillespie, Angus K. 1976. Pennsylvania Folk Festivals in the 1930's. *Pennsylvania Folklife* 26, 1: 2–17.
- Harasta, Joseph. 2014. The Amish—A People of Preservation and Profitability. A Look at the Amish Industry in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. *Journal of Amish and Plain Anabaptist Studies* 2, 1: 23–41.
- Hinchman, Lewis P. – Hinchman, Sandra K. 2001. Introduction. In: Hinchman, Lewis P. – Hinchman, Sandra K. (eds.): *Memory, Identity, Community. The Idea of Narrative in the Human Sciences*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press: xiii–xxxii.
- Inoue, Miyako. 2004. Introduction. Temporality and Historicity In and Through Linguistic Ideology. *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 14, 1: 1–5.
- Kraybill, Donald – Bowman, Carl Desportes. 2001. *On the Backroad to Heaven*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Louden, Mark L. 2016. *Pennsylvania Dutch. The Story of an American Language*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

- Nolt, Steven M. 2002. *Foreigners in Their Own Land. Pennsylvania Germans in the Early Republic*. University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Ochs, Elinor – Capps, Lisa. 2001. *Living Narrative. Creating Lives in Everyday Storytelling*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Pavlicová, Martina. 2018. The Power of Tradition(?). Folk Revival Groups as Bearers of Folk Culture. In: Stavělová, Daniela – Buckland, Theresa Jill (eds.): *Folklore Revival Movements in Europe Post 1950*. Prague: Institute of Ethnology of the Czech Academy of Sciences: 47–56.
- Pennsylvania German Cultural Heritage Center, Kutztown University, Kutztown, PA. Don Yoder Collection: Kutztown Folk Festival Archive, KFF-001-002-1953, *Kutztown Folk Festival 1953 Brochure*, Pennsylvania Dutch Folklore Center, Franklin and Marshall College, Lancaster, PA.
- Richards, Greg. 2007. The Festivalization of Society or the Socialization of Festivals? The Case of Catalunya. In: Richards, Greg (ed.): *Cultural Tourism. Global and Local Perspectives*. New York: Routledge: 257–280.
- Richards, Louis. 2014. Susanna Cox. Her Crime and Its Expiation. *Berks History Center* [on-line]. [2023-11-26]. Available at: <https://berkshistory.org/article/susanna-cox-her-crime-and-its-expiation/>
- Schlegel, Jennifer. 2004. *Pennsylvania German Overhearers. Living with Language Maintenance and Language Loss*. PhD dissertation. UCLA.
- Schlegel, Jennifer. 2012. Orthography as Practice. A Pennsylvania German Case Study. In: Jaffe, Alexandra – Androutsopoulos, Jannis – Sebba, Mark – Johnson, Sally (eds.): *Orthography as Social Action. Scripts, Spelling, Identity and Power*. Boston: De Gruyter Mouton: 77–202.
- Silverstein, Michael. 2003. The Whens and Wheres – As Well As Hows – of Ethnolinguistic Recognition. *Public Culture* 15, 3: 531–557.
- Stavělová, Daniela. 2018. The Folklore Revival Movement in Former Czechoslovakia. Dichotomy of the Term. In: Stavělová, Daniela – Buckland, Theresa Jill (eds.): *Folklore Revival Movements in Europe Post 1950*. Prague: Institute of Ethnology of the Czech Academy of Sciences: 113–127.
- Valuska, David L. – Keller, Christian B. 2004. *Damn Dutch. Pennsylvania Germans at Gettysburg*. Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books.
- Yoder, Don. 1950. Pennsylvania Dutch Folk Dancing. *The Pennsylvania Dutchman* 2, 5: 1. [2024-04-12]. Available at: [https://digital.fandm.edu/\\_flysystem/fedora/2022-04/Vol2No5.pdf](https://digital.fandm.edu/_flysystem/fedora/2022-04/Vol2No5.pdf)
- Yoder, Don. 1980. The Palatine Connection. The Pennsylvania German Culture and Its European Roots. In: *Ebbes fer Alle-Ebber-Ebbes fer Dich. Something for Everyone – Something for You. Essays in memoriam Albert Franklin Buffington*. Breinigsville, PA: The Pennsylvania German Society: 105–129.